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What Can a Man Believe?

By

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By Rabbi Martin Zielonka

Based on the Book, "What Can a Man Believe," by Bruce Barton.

It was in a Pullman car—I noticed a man reading a book and he, in turn, noticing my interest in what he was reading said, "There ought to be more books like this; it hits the bull's-eye at every point: it is what we need today." I looked at the book and it was Bruce Barton's "What Can A Man Believe." Noting the enthusiasm of this man, who seemed an average successful business man, I deemed it best to read the book and to see what appealed so strongly to the average man.

Religion is a favorite topic of conversation wherever men forgather. They love to show their liberalism, or at least the veneer of liberalism. They love to point out the places in the Bible in which they do not believe, where moral standards seem to be lower than our present standards, and to pick flaws in the life story of Bible heroes, forgetting or probably not knowing, that the sublimity of the Bible rests on its splendid human characteristics. In the Bible no one is a goody-goody, each one sins in some particular way and the good of the completed life so overshadows the slip from settled standards of morality, that we recognize brethren, fellow workers, in the fields of human endeavor. Not even a Moses, was sinless. He was not granted the right to enter the Promised Land. Judaism knows no perfect man at any time in the history of the world. Thus in these conversations we gain an insight into Mr. Average Man and Mr. Average Man feels that this book of Bruce

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Baton's is just about the last word on his favorite theme

Some one in reviewing the works of Bruce Barton said; as the author of "Book That Nobody Knows" he presented the Bible as only he knew it: that as the author of "The Man Nobody Knows" he presented a sketch of the founder of Christianity who was only known to him. If I might carry this suggestion a little further, I would say that in presenting "What Can A Man Believe," he really presents a work on "The Religion Nobody Knows." And in saying that I am epitomizing my comment on the book.

The author traces the origin of faith, he shows the accomplishments of faith and then in his own words "The plea of this book is for a frank recognition of the truth that the faith which begets great achievements and the faith which worships are both of the same spirit: that religion is as natural and normal a part of human experience as birth and growth and hope and love. We say that it is time to take religion out of the hush-hush class: to recognize frankly and normally that every worth while enterprise is an act of faith that:

There is no unbelief
Whoever plants a seed beneath the sod
And waits to see it push away the clod
He trusts in God."

This is splendid. As also is splendid his criticism of the use to which the religious forces are put today—"And the great forces of its organized power are exerted for what? To keep people who like wine and who consider there is no moral wrong in drinking it, from having it. To suppress Sunday games. To be very bitter and unforgiving toward the girl who yields to the impulses of hot blood. These things which Jesus regarded as of less importance have become the law and the prophets. And the other and greater sins go usually unrebuked."

Credit also must be granted for pointing out to the average man that "education in America did not start with some millionaire donating a stadium: it started with a sincere hope that learning and religious leadership might be preserved." Not the men of wealth are responsible for Harvard, but the humble preachers and teachers who gave their libraries and donated their time and talent. This ought to be emphasized in this age where we believe that millions are absolutely needed and that millionaires present the only saviors of our schools and our public works. At the same time we want to recognize that "if democracy and modern education are the gifts of the **church,** so also are hospitals for the sick and insane, and all the multitude of agencies for social forces in which our civilization has so much pride.

The word church must be understood in the broadest sense. For the synagogue and Temple have been leaders in these humanitarian efforts and they have received their inspiration from the teaching of the Old Testament. Jewish hospitals and orphanages are the leaders in this line of endeavor and the Jew has given to social service not only its technique but also its method of raising funds.

I shall not discuss all the questions that Bruce Barton claims are the inspiration for his work. The first two questions he has not answered satisfactorily. He has often begged the question. But when he tries to answer—"Of the various religions now extant which is the best?" "What few simple things, if any, can a business man believe" and "If there is to be a faith of the future, what kind of a faith will it be?" then I want the right to question every statement that he has made.

He discusses Buddhism, Confucianism and Mohammedanism and naturally sets these aside for Christianity. Just where he got his information about these foreign religions, I do not know, but judging from his statements they were de-

rived from biased sources, whose object was to prove the inferiority of these religions to that of his own. And in doing so he naturally magnifies his own. I do not know how many followers of these faiths Bruce Barton knows, so that by his examination into their lives he might deduce the effect of the teaching upon their conduct? Probably very few, if any! But he surely knows some Jews, he knows of the activities of Jews in every form of human endeavor, he could easily verify Jewish facts in the large centers of American life and yet he has not a line about Judaism and its teachings or about the possibility that it may contain those fundamental truths that a man can believe, because it is the foundation of all Christian teaching. It is strange that in searching for truth, for fundamentals by which the modern man can live, he should go far afield, to Buddhism, Confucianism and Mohammedanism, when there existed at his side a faith, from which his own faith has developed which still shows vitality and ability to adjust itself to its surroundings.

Thus for instance, he ascribes to his form of faith those cardinal doctrines that belong primarily to Judaism and because the sister religions have **not** accepted them are still emphasized by that veteran of faiths, Judaism. For instance, he tells us that the message of Jesus was—"God is a Father, who may be approached directly by any of His Children without mediation of temple or priest." Now is a matter of fact the churches that have been founded in the name of Jesus, emphasize at all times that God can best be approached, or only approached, through the mediatorship of Jesus: while accepting God as the Father, they feel that it is through his son that salvation will come. At the same time the author is ignorant of the fact that even within the ancient temple walls, where priests offered sacrifices, there were special places where prayer alone was offered, and **that** prayer was directed directly to

God. As early as in the days of Eli, the priest, Hannah answers—"No, my lord, I am a woman of a sorrowful spirit: I have drunk neither wine or strong drink, but I poured out my soul before the Lord", for Hannah had "prayed unto the Lord and wept sore." The Jew has always taught and is still teaching today that God is the Father who may be approached directly at all times. That is the message of our holy-day season—God, the Father, offering a means of redemption unto his children.

And if he examines "the various religions now extant" in order to reach some reasonable conclusion as to "which is best" then out of fairness to his readers, out of fairness to the struggle that Judaism has carried on all these centuries, he ought to have included that faith in his survey. If he had done this, then he might have found an easier answer to the other two questions. He might not have offered forced explanations for miracles and other things that need so much explaining and he may have found the reason why "it is likewise true that Jesus of Nazareth might feel uncomfortable in some of the temples erected in His name."

And then when he answers the questions concerning religion he presents a diluted Christianity that can hardly be accepted by any organized Christian Church. He presents a faith that approaches nearer and nearer to that faith from which Christianity sprang and which this house of God is proclaiming year in and year out.

"What are the simplest things we can write down?" he says. He places them in this order, 1. I believe in myself (and no one who reads the book can have any doubt that Bruce Barton believes in himself). 2. I know that I am intelligent. 3. Because I am, I believe in God. 4. Immortality of some sort is a necessary compliment to the existence and nature of God."

We will not quarrel with the order in which these axioms are placed:

we would simply point out that therein is said nothing of the great body of doctrine that is essential to Christianity. Nor is such a statement a satisfactory one for the religion of today. If this is the order of the credos of modern belief then has man made God in his own image and he believes as Barton says that "Intelligence is God." Surely there is not found in such a statement the sanctions and urge for further endeavor along these lines which he previously pointed out as the gifts of religion to the civilization of all times—education, hospitals, orphanages and general recognition of our duty to the lowly. Surely that cannot be the "faith of the futture," it would be a sterile faith.

And before giving our answer as to "What Can a Man Believe," let us note the strictures that he places upon the modern church. Whether they apply to the modern synagogue, I shall let you answer for yourselves. He says—First—"In one respect the church can learn honesty from business." He makes this statement with reference to church statistics about which we heard so much a few months ago. I am under the impression that it is the business of religion to teach honesty to business. At least, I believe that business needs that lesson. if the record of a famous lawsuit recently tried in Washington is a criterion as to what is going on in the business world, and if the innumerable lawsuits that crowd the courts of every commuity in America prove anything. Secondly — "It sounds almost shocking, yet it is true, that in some respects the church does not have as much faith as business." There is a kernel of truth in this matter. Somehow or another the business man lives day by day through faith and carries on his business through faith, but when he faces the real issues of life then he lacks that strength of faith that will move mountains. As Barton tells us —The whole modern commercial structure is built on a foundation of credit. And what is the world credit,

where does it come from? Credo—I believe. Business is good or bad, statisticians point out, according to the degree of confidence. What is confidence? Confides, with faith. Such and such a concern is weak because its personnel lacks fidelity.Fidelity: fidelis: faithful." The same belief, confidence and faith we need in the affairs of our churches and synagogues.

Third—Business is endlessly flexible and adaptable: the church is too often rigid and unadaptable. Therein is a valid criticism of many modern churches but it is not valid so far as this temple or its interpretation of religion is concerned. It does adopt itself to the needs of the day; it has set aside the outworn garments of the fathers and is seeking to clothe in greater splendor the strong body of Jewish teachings that is fundamental to all faith. Fourthly—Business checks up on itself frequently to be sure that it is still headed for its original goal. Is there not need for a similar check up on the part of the church?" Yes. and the church or synagogue that fails to do this, is not meeting the demands of a modern church

I must hasten to a close. If Bruce Barton had been honest in his search for an answer to the question, "What Can A Man Believe" and if he had turned to the teaching of the Reform Jewish Synagogue, he would have found his answer if he were open minded to accept it. Let me place it in the words that our confirmation classes learn each year—

1. "We believe with a sincere and steadfast faith that there is a God, who is one and only one the Creator, Preserver and Ruler of the World."

2. "We believe with a sincere and steadfast faith that man is created in the image of God, innocent and pure, with the impulse to develop toward perfection."

3. "We believe with a sincere and steadfast faith that the soul of man is immortal, its righteousness brings reward, its wickedness punishment.

4. "We believe with a sincere and steadfast faith in the common fatherhood of God and the common brotherhood of man."

To the latter we, as Jews, add—"To realize this is the great aim and hope—the mission of Israel."

Without this latter phrase, here is a statement of fundamentals, beginning with God and not with man, which we feel that every honest man can accept. We have here the teachings which have been and will continue to be the inspiration for all the splendid fellowship work for which Barton gives the Church credit. We have here a statement that does not need to apologize for or explain away some of the teachings ascribed to religion. These answer definitely the question of his book "What Can A Man Believe" and we present it to him for consideration. For the religion he presents to the American public is a "Religion that Nobody Knows" and that no Christian Church woul accept as its teachings and its program.

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